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Freshman Academy at One School in East Tennessee: A Mixed Method Study

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Freshman Academy at One School in East Tennessee: A Mixed Methods Study

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ABSTRACT

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The purpose of this study was to compare the student achievement prior to and after the implementation of a freshman academy at one school in East Tennessee. The researcher used student data from the end of course exam scores for Algebra I and English I. The failure rate of freshman prior to and after the implementation of the Freshman Academy was examined. The data were analyzed using a chi square statistical analysis. A significant difference was observed in the end of course exam scores for Algebra I and English I after the implementation of the Freshman Academy. Qualitative data examined for this study were interviews with administrators and teachers discussing the implementation process of the Freshman Academy.

The quantitative findings revealed that students who attended the Freshman Academy had increased achievement on the end of course exam for Algebra I and English I. The failure rates for the freshman who attended the Freshman Academy revealed there was a decrease.

The qualitative findings revealed that the administrators and teachers were concerned with the isolation of the freshman at the academy. Isolating the freshman to allow for maturity and to allow for the fostering of the sense of community was essential, but this decreases the positive interaction with the upper classmen.

DEDICATION

I would like to dedicate this dissertation to the following people:

To my Heavenly Father, without your love, mercy, and guidance I would have never had the strength to reach for my dream.

To my wonderful husband Gary, who loves me unconditionally. Without you I don't know if I would have had the courage to pursue my dream. You are amazing. I thank God daily for sending you to me.

To my daughters Tatiana and Elanie, words cannot describe how much I love you. God knew we were going to become an awesome family when He sent the two of you and your father into my life. I am very proud of the young ladies you are becoming. I pray that you both have the spirit to seek out your own dreams and, be daring enough to see them through.

To my son James, you are my miracle baby. I love you dearly. I am so proud of the young man you are becoming. You are a miracle in more ways than one. Having you brought my life full circle and proved just how perfect God's Will is for our family. Never lose sight of your dreams.

To my parents James and Katherine Daugherty, your love and guidance made me what I am today. I wish you were here to see the woman I have become, but I know you are both smiling down from Heaven.

To my in-laws George and Brenda Robinson, you brought me into your family with open arms and who love me as your own.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

History of Issue

The transition to high school can become overwhelming as students begin making choices that affect their goal of graduation and their future beyond high school (Mizelle, 2005). Students making the high school transition experience a plethora of changes. Among these changes are a physical move to a different environment with new teachers, new expectations, and new classmates (McIntosh, Flannery, Sugai, Braun, & Cochrane, 2008). The physical change of moving to a new school along with new expectations of the school administrators and teachers can result in ninth graders' perception of their new environment being very large, competitive, and impersonal. These perceptions can cause a student who is academically deficient to be at risk of failing his or her freshman year. These students are also at risk for becoming high school dropouts (Mizelle, 2005). As reported by the United States Department of Education, 80.4% of freshmen graduate from high school in Tennessee (United States Department of Education, 2013).

For students who are emotionally delayed or academically unmotivated the traditional high school can be impersonal. The impersonal environment within a traditional high school can lead to students being overlooked. These overlooked students can develop a negative self-image and low self-esteem (Mizelle, 2005). The impersonal overtone can cause some students to take longer adapting to their environments (Neild, 2009). The factors of a negative self-image, low self-esteem, and trouble adapting can impact student achievement (Mizelle, 2005; Neild, 2009). Baumeister, Campbell, Krueger, and Vohs (2003) compiled a literature review of research on self-esteem and

self-image. The conclusion of their research was that self-worth does impact student achievement. Clever (2007) stated academic failures contributes to low self-esteem. Students with academic deficiencies come to the classroom with the expectation of failing.

Wilcock noted that parents see the transition to high school as the early stages of their children's independence. Some parents choose not to interfere with their children's academic choices (Wilcock, 2007). Students are less supervised than previously during the middle school age both at home and at school (Neild, 2009). Students are expected to take more responsibility than in middle school for their academics and personal behavioral (McIntosh et al., 2008). This increase in responsibility happens simultaneously at a time in the student's life when peer influence increases leading to changes that affect their academics and behaviors (Neild, 2009). Upon entering high school, students are faced with a new set of academic standards. If they enter with academic deficiencies, they have a hard time keeping up with the demands of a more rigorous curriculum. The cultural make up of their peers has changed. They will have classes with students of different socioeconomic and community backgrounds. At this stage of development problems at home become exaggerated. These issues can hinder students from making a successful transition into high school and hinder them from graduating (Bridgeland, Dilulio, & Morison, 2006; Mehta, 2008).

Freshman academies have an advantage of being small, which allows more focus on the students. The small learning communities adopted by most freshman academies encourage more communication between the educators, parents, and students. The focal point for everyone involved becomes the student (Chicago Public Schools, 2003). With a

more intense focus on the student, students and parents are more motivated to work for a successful high school transition (Wilcock, 2007). With small learning communities the ability to increase home-school relations becomes more manageable. With teachers monitoring a smaller number of activities for students and parents, events such as open house, parent-teacher conferences, and awards celebrations can be communicated to parents more effectively. Parental involvement is not seen often in the high school setting. By making the effort to include parents, this creates a welcoming environment and encourages participation at a critical time in a child's life (Neild, 2009).

Statement of Problem

The purpose of this research is to examine student achievement prior to and after the implementation of a freshman academy in East Tennessee. The student data examined were end of course exams for Algebra I and English I. The number of students who failed their freshman year after the implementation was another achievement outcome examined. The goal to increase students' achievement has called for increased accountability on the part of the educators. The United States goal for education has been outlined through federal mandates dating back to the 1950s. From the National Defense Act of 1958 to Race to the Top 2009, legislators have attempted to federally mandate funding and curriculum to improve student achievement. In the end K – 12 educators are charged with the task of producing college-ready graduates or employable laborers. Dixon, DeVoss, and Davis (2008) observed with this increase accountability students are being lost because this priority has sparked the evolution of standardize testing. They also stated that the need for college-ready and employable labors cannot be denied. The question arises are we losing the valuable skills of creativity and critical thinking in the

urgency for the country to compete globally? Dixon et al. stated that educational reformers are looking for milestones in a student's educational career that could cause a student not to become employable or college ready. The transition from the eighth to the ninth grade has become the focal point, thus the trend of freshman academies. The school of thought is by providing a solid emotional and academic foundation in the first year of high school students will be more apt to complete the requirements in high school to graduate (Dixon et al., 2008).

Research Questions

This mixed methods study is an examination of three qualitative research questions about the implementation of the Freshman Academy at a rural East Tennessee School.

1. What was the process of the implementation of the Freshman Academy?
2. What were the administrator's perceptions of the student's freshman experience academically and socially before and after implementation of the Freshman Academy?
3. What were the teachers' perceptions of the student's freshman experience academically and socially before and after implementation of the Freshman Academy?

The quantitative portion of this study was an examination of three questions regarding the proficiency of students in Algebra I and English I as well as the number of credits earned by freshman before and after implementation of the Freshman Academy.

1. Is there a significant difference in EOC scores Algebra I before (2010-2011) and after (2011-2012) the implementation of the Freshman Academy?

2. Is there a significant difference in EOC in English I before (2010-2011) and after (2011-2012) the implementation of the Freshman Academy?
3. Is there a significant difference in the number of students failing their freshman year before (2010-2011) and after (2011-2012) the implementation of the Freshman Academy?

Significance of the Study

This study is of significance at a time in which public education is perceived to be in a national crisis. Stakeholders in education have scrutinized public education for the past 2 decades claiming that seniors are not being prepared for college or the workforce. Aud, KewalRamani, and Frolich (2011) asserted that a large number of the unemployed were also high school dropouts. Aud et al. also observed that in 2009 – 2010, 47% of graduates took the ACT. Of those taking the ACT, 66% met the college readiness benchmark of English and 43% met the college readiness benchmark for mathematics. In Tennessee for the same year, 59% of students met the college readiness benchmark for English and 27% of students met the college readiness benchmark for mathematics (ACT, 2012). Many believe the solution to the crisis is providing a stronger foundation in high school by shifting the focus from seniors to freshman. McMillen (2004) stated that the consensus is that the high schools in the United States are too large. Larger schools have documented more problems than those seen in smaller schools. Some of the issues are increased dropout rates, discipline problems, and decreased achievement. Schools are not producing college-ready or employable laborers for the workforce. Stakeholders from the economic community view this as a weakness for the nation (Gelberg, 2007).

With increased accountability comes the urgency to answer the questions of where the problems with student achievement are occurring in education and how to solve them. Numerous researchers have noted that the transition to the ninth grade is tumultuous and at the same time extremely crucial. Those on the forefront of educational reform have looked to the ninth grade to create a foundation for high school students. Several educational reform models outline how to create this foundation for the freshman students. The transition for the freshman is the focal point of the educational reform models. Developing a successful transition of the freshmen year is the strategy to increase student achievement (Herlihy, 2007; Neild, 2009).

Definition of Terms

For the purpose of this study the following terms are defined:

Core Classes: classes designated as required to pass and meet graduation requirements. These are English, mathematics, science, and social studies (Tennessee Department of Education, 2012).

Credits Earned: classes taken and successfully passed with the grade of an A, B, C, or D to fulfill graduation requirements (Tennessee Department of Education, 2012).

End of Course Exams (EOC): a state mandated assessment for end of course assessments in secondary schools for core classes, specifically Algebra I and English I (Tennessee Department of Education, 2012).

Failing the ninth grade: a student not making a minimum grade of 70 in three or more core classes (Tennessee Department of Education, 2012).

Freshman Academy: a program created for ninth grade (freshman) students to provide added support during the transition to high school. The freshman academy is a

small learning community that isolates ninth grade students from the remainder of the student body. The freshman academy can be a separate building or in a designated area in the school (Wilder, Murphree, & Dutton, 2009).

Graduation Rate: a federal benchmark that is calculated from the percentage of students who graduate on time. This calculation excludes GED and Special Education diplomas (Tennessee Department of Education, 2012).

No Child Left Behind (NCLB): the 2001 reauthorization of the 1965 *Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA)*. The main focal point of NCLB is accountability at the local, state, and national levels (United States Department of Education, 2012).

Limitations and Delimitations

This study was limited to 1,108 students, 2 administrators and 6 teachers interviewed from a freshman academy in East Tennessee. The use of one freshman academy in one school district has limited the study as does the time frame. The academic years of 2010 – 2011 and 2011 – 2012 are the years prior to and after the implementation of the freshman academy is a limitation. Another limitation is the use of the end of course exams for Algebra I and English I.

This study is delimited to administrators and teachers who were associated with the freshman academy before and after the implementation.

Summary

This mixed methods study is organized into five chapters. Chapter 1 contains history of the issue, statement of the problem including research questions, significance

of the study, definitions of the terms of the study, limitations, and delimitations, and a summary. Chapter 2 includes a review of the literature regarding a brief history of schools from the Puritans to the comprehensive high school; milestones in education since the 1950s; school size; transition from eighth to the ninth grade; smaller learning communities; and freshman academies. Chapter 3 describes the methodology, qualitative and quantitative research designs, population, data collection, research questions, data analysis, validity, and reliability. Chapter 4 presents the analysis of the qualitative research questions and the quantitative research questions. Chapter 5 concludes the study with a discussion and conclusion of the findings; implications for practice; and recommendations for further research.

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

From the Puritans to the Comprehensive High School

> "Education is the most powerful weapon which you can use to change the World" (Mandela, ND).

Watson (2012) reported when the first Europeans came to the shores of North America, hundreds of years ago, most of the learning occurred at home. Most parents taught their children at home using the Bible and those who could afford more hired private tutors. The Puritans were the first in North America to champion the need for public education. Prior to the American Revolution, the Puritans established schools that not only taught reading, writing, and math but also emphasized the group's core values.

In April 1635 the *Boston Latin School* opened. It became the first public school in the United States and remains the oldest public school in America. The education of the sons of the elite in Boston was the primary goal of the school. The curriculum followed that of the 18th century Latin-school movement, the classics. The school was modeled after the *Boston Grammar School* in Lincolnshire, U.K. This is the area from which most Bostonians of the time originated. At the *Boston Latin Schoo,* Latin was mandatory starting in seventh grade (Boston Latin School, 2012).

Shortly after the American Revolution, Thomas Jefferson began arguing that our newly independent nation needed an educational system paid for by tax dollars. His ideals were ignored for the next century. By the 1840s public schools began popping up intermittently within communities that could afford them. In the opinion of Horace Mann this was not good enough. Horace Mann of Massachusetts and Henry Barnard of Connecticut began their crusade for a free and compulsory education for every child in

the nation (Watson, 2012). With a tireless determination Horace Mann began his lifelong journey to improve the state of education in Massachusetts in 1837 as the state senate president. Growing up in a poor farming family, he was educated in a local one-room schoolhouse which he later said was in a state of disrepair and inferior (PBS, 2012).

For most of the late 18th and early 19th centurys students at public schools attended classes for only a few weeks, primarily during the winter months. This was done to allow children to work on the farms. The schoolhouses that existed were poorly equipped. Most of these schools were in disrepair and manned by untrained teachers. Mann set out to rectify this situation with his influence as a statesman and experience as a social reformer. He was instrumental in establishing the Massachusetts state board of education. He then left the senate to serve as the Massachusetts state board of education's first secretary. Mann saw education as a way for personal improvement through equalization of social classes. He completed a comprehensive survey of the condition of all the schools in the state, established teacher training institutes, increased the school year to 6 months, and obtained support for funding teachers' salaries, books, and the construction of more schools. Mann's efforts improved the condition of schools in Massachusetts. As a result of Mann's efforts, Massachusetts remains on the forefront of education and educational reform (PBS, 2012).

Mann's argument was that all children should learn together in what he termed as common schools. Campaigning for school reform in Mann's era was marked with turmoil. As the revenue from farms began to decrease, the need for skilled laborers began to increase. Farmers began moving into the cities to work in factories. The populations within the cities began to increase exponentially. With this increase in

population, came an increase in urban poverty and crime. These both became critical issues. Educational reformers like Mann campaigned for state regulated public schools that were perceived to be the solution. Schools would provide a way to bring a sense of order and discipline to the working class. The curriculum of public schools was to emphasize morals and standardization of all academics (PBS, 2012).

According to Watson (2012) in 1852 Massachusetts became the first state to pass compulsory school laws. The law mandated that children between the ages of 8 and 14 were required to attend school for three months out of each year with at least six weeks of the three months being consecutive. The fine for not sending your child to school was no more than $20. New York followed with the same laws the next year. The purposes of these laws were two-fold. One was the belief that public school was the means to improve literacy rates and issues with the increasing immigrant populations. It was believed that public school could be used to assimilate the immigrant populations. The second purpose was to protect children from being exploited as cheap labor. If a child desired to work, he or she had to get approval from the school. Simultaneously, restrictions were placed on the type of work and the number of hours that a child could work (Watson, 2012). This was a precursor to the Common School Movement. The common school advocates led the way to the establishment of a free elementary education for everyone that was financed by taxpayers. These public schools were accountable to local boards of education and the individual state's government. The common-school movement rallied behind Massachusetts and New York for compulsory attendance laws for elementary aged children. By 1918 these advocates saw compulsory laws established in all states (Chesapeake, 2012).

With the increase of schools, came the need for leadership and structure. Elwood Cubberly, using a new industrial management model, designed an administrative system that could be used for schools, principals, and superintendents. The basis for the hierarchical model came from a business basis. At this time the structure of schools was left up to a group of men considered to be experts for their experiences in the world. This became the standard for educational systems for the first half of the 20th century (PBS, 2012). Goldin (2008) noted at first high schools, although free, commonly used entrance exams to ensure students could complete the work that would be required of them. As high school enrollment in the United States began to increase, this level of education became required and free. Cubberley's leadership model became extremely useful with this new high school movement. From this movement the curriculum made a shift to a more practical approach to produce skilled laborers.

In the early 20th century, the United States exceeded Europe in high school enrollment. Unlike the United States, European school systems were closed with uniform academic standards. By the mid 1950s an estimated 80% of the United States students who passed the high school entrance exams graduated. From an economic viewpoint this movement led to an increased educated workforce of both men and women (Goldin, 2008).

As high schools became the norm, the shift was made to comprehensive high schools. These schools were designed to give students a free education and encourage completion of the curriculum required for graduation. The goal then, as it is now, was to graduate workforce ready laborers. After graduation these students would be prepared to enter the workforce and contribute to the United States economy (Goldin, 2008).

The current American postsecondary system is based on the model established in the 1950s; this model was created with the assumption that most students would not continue to pursue a postsecondary education or any further vocational training. Therefore, there was little need for rigorous academic preparation. Many parents, as well as students, saw the new vocational training that took the place of academics as a shortcut to work in the factories of the Industrial Revolution that evolved from the agricultural enterprises (United States Department of Education, 2012).

Milestones in Education Since 1950

Deliberation by the Supreme Court for *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas* (1954) started in December of 1952. This case was a name given to five separate cases heard by the U. S. Supreme court regarding the issue of segregation in public schools. In the fall of 1950, the Browns and 12 other families from Topeka, Kansas, were approached by the NAACP to attempt the registration of their colored children in all white schools (Brown v. BOE, 1954). The students were rejected by the schools on the premise of *Plessy v. Ferguson, 1896* (Plessy v. Ferguson, 1896). This led to the combination of similar lawsuits from South Carolina, Delaware, and Washington, DC. These court cases all had the underlying issue of the constitutionality of state sponsored segregation in public schools. The cases were presented together as an appeal to the United States Supreme Court. The Virginia Court decided unanimously that the doctrine of "separate but equal" was unconstitutional. Chief Justice Earl Warren's opinion stated that the idea from *Plessy v. Ferguson* of separate but equal was not the case in segregated schools. Segregated schools may be separate but are not equal. There is not a way to make them equal; therefore these children were deprived equal protection under the law

(Brown v. BOE, 1954). This case was the first step into the world of accountability for subgroups as dictated by NCLB (NCLB, 2002).

Three years after the Supreme Court ruling in *Brown v. BOE, 1954*, Governor Orval Faubus of Arkansas refused to comply with the desegregation of public schools. Nine African American students, later known as the *Little Rock Nine*, attempted to enter Central High School in Little Rock, Arkansas, but were met with resistance. Governor Faubus was ordered by President Eisenhower to call in the National Guard to protect these students, but to the contrary, the Governor left the students to an angry mob to be later evacuated from the building by the local police. This coerced President Eisenhower into the decision to send the 101st Airborne Paratroopers. The President then placed the National Guard under federal orders. The students finished the school year under federal protection. The next year Governor Faubus closed all the high schools in Arkansas forcing the *Little Rock Nine* to continue high school via correspondence courses or by attending school out of state. In the fall of 1959, the school board ordered the high schools to be reopened where four of the nine African American students returned to Central High School. This marked the beginning of the Federal Government's active involvement in public education (National Park Services, 2012).

On the heels of desegregation, President Eisenhower faced the reality that Russia had become more scientifically advanced with the launch of Sputnik. Sputnik was the first man-made object to orbit the Earth on October 4, 1957 (Kranz, 2001). With the launch of this beach ball size satellite, the face of education was changed. The educational agenda for the United States changed. Stakeholders from the political and military communities had a sudden fear of what this could mean for the future of military

campaigns. The launch of Sputnik ushered in a new political, military, technological, and scientific agenda that was dependent on the youth of the United States. While the Sputnik launch was a single event, it marked the start of the space competition between the United States and Russia (NASA, 2012). The following year, in 1958, the *National Defense Education Act (NDEA)* was signed into law. Congress agreed to spend $9 billion to increase the nation's military force and science education to prepare American students for college degrees in science, math, and engineering. Although the NDEA did increase the United States' educational abilities and opportunities of the nation's youth, it also created educational gaps of the socioeconomically disadvantaged (NDEA, 1958).

As a result of the widening achievement gap in 1960, President Lyndon B. Johnson in 1965 signed the *Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA)* into law (Elementary and Secondary Education Act, 1965). ESEA was part of Lyndon B. Johnson's "War on Poverty" and provided federal funds to help low-income students. From this legislation, educational programs such as Title I were created (Siegel, 2012). The ESEA has been reauthorized nine times since 1965. Some of the most notable reauthorizations have been with President Bill Clinton in 1994 and President George Walker Bush in 2001 (NCLB, 2002; United States, 1994).

One catalyst that continued to keep education in the political forefront was the 1983 report, *A Nation at Risk*. The report found that high school curriculum had no curricular focus to guide the student course of studies to prepare students for college or the workforce. Few students were encouraged to take rigorous courses. Graduation expectations for high school students were low in most states. When comparing American schools to European schools, the American school day was two hours shorter

than European schools, and the school year was on average forty days shorter. The reforms recommended by the report were: focus curriculum for all students to four years of English; three years of math, science, and social studies; two years of foreign language for college track students only; and a half year of computer science. The report also encouraged the adoption of more rigorous expectations and measurable standards for students from grade school through college. Teacher preparation, higher salaries, paid professional development, planning time, and incentives to remain in the classroom were all recommended to increase teacher quality. Educators, the community, and elected officials were to be held accountable for providing leadership to achieve reforms and stable financial support for schools (Nation at Risk, 1983).

Gelberg (2007) pointed out that since the 1983 report *A Nation at Risk*, the business community's desire to become stakeholders in the American Educational System has grown. Business leaders have continued to find fault with schools across the nation. At this point corporate America has had a decisive role in education reform. Many of the reform proposals seen in the recent past have been proposed and supported by various persons in the business sector. Gelberg expressed the concern that the collective business world bottom line is to produce employable adults and this may come at a price to students as schools become more of an assembly line for education (Gelberg, 2007).

Improving American Schools Act (IASA) of 1994, a reauthorization of ESEA, 1965, signed into law by President Clinton provided Title I funding for programming for economically disadvantaged students and also called for increased accountability by school systems (IASA, 1994). In the same year *Goals 2000* was signed into law. *Goals*

2000 expectations were that by the year 2000 all children in America would be ready to start school; high school graduation rates would increase to at least 90%; every school in America will be drug and violence free; U.S. students will be first in math and science. Along with the achievement in math and science, students will leave the 4th grade, 5th grade, and 12th grade having demonstrated competency in other core courses (Goals, 2000).

President Bush's NCLB reauthorized ESEA and withdrew all of President Clinton's *Goals 2000*. NCLB called for more accountability through Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP). AYP is a requirement under NCLB for districts and schools to show annual improvement toward the goals outlined in the legislation. AYP ranges from teacher qualification to student results on standardized tests. Failure to meet AYP can lead to students transferring to other schools in the district, to the appointment of new administration, and the faculty having to go through a hiring process to retain their jobs at their schools. It also required teachers to be highly qualified. Teachers had to show competency in the content area in which they taught through testing in that area or work experience. All schools, districts, and states would be graded by an annual Report Card. Included in NCLB is a goal of 100 percent proficiency for all students including Special Education students by 2014 (NCLB, 2001).

In 2009 President Barack Obama created *Race to the Top*, a $4.35 billion competitive grant. States competed and earned points that were focused on intricate principal and teacher evaluations. States also earned points for adopting common core standards with the purpose to improve student achievement. Those who received the grant and could show a plan for measuring student achievement were eligible to apply for

a waiver from the stringent NCLB standards of 100% proficiency by 2014. This prevented federal money from being cut in states' budgets that did not meet AYP (Race to the Top, 2009).

Jennings, Nobbit, Brayboy, and Cozart (2007) observed that schools and school districts have the conundrum of answering to more than one governing body. As a result of increased accountability, education has shifted emphasis from the whole child to focus on the standardized test, particularly in mathematics and reading. The performance of students on mandated, standardized tests is the determining factor of whether or not teachers, schools, and districts are making progress in the benchmarks of language arts and mathematics. The consequence for lack of progress is the individual schools and in some cases the districts being put on target for intervention from the state department of education if progress is not improved. The point in which the state board of education intervenes varies with each individual state (NCLB, 2002).

The National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) is the most comprehensive national test; NAEP assesses grades 4, 8, and 12 in the core courses including the arts from a curriculum developed by the National Assessment Governing Board. These grade levels were selected because they are considered critical junctures in students' lives. Along with being the most comprehensive test, it is also the only national assessment. NAEP, also known as the Nation's Report Card, meets the national assessment requirement of NCLB, which requires testing in reading and mathematics at least once every 2 years. States receiving federal money are required to administer the assessment (National Assessment Education Progress, 2012).

With the knowledge that our nation is losing its competitive edge on the global stage, policy makers, politicians, and the business community have higher stakes in education than ever before in history. Friedman (2007) reported that leadership and advancement in the global economy depends on creativity that is in a constant state of renewal. In this new, flat world, high levels of knowledge are critical in the core classes as well as the arts. With the inclusion of the arts, the United States edge is boosted with creativity and innovation. However, India and China, for example, have pushed students to obtain solid foundations in mathematics and science. The purpose is to bring these countries out of poverty. India and China have begun their ascent into the global economic stage. Regardless, they pose a perceived threat for the United States economically due to their rise educationally (Friedman, 2007).

School Size

As early as 1915 Joseph Kennedy, a dean of the school of education at North Dakota State University, began questioning school size. In his book *Rural Life and the Rural School,* a reprint of his original writing in 1922, Kennedy pulled from his own experience in a rural school setting. His underlying question was what is the lower limit for a school's size? In the rural schools, it made sense to ask how small a school could be and maintain its pedagogical viability (Kennedy, 2012). Kennedy's counterpart at the time, Elwood Cubberley, was a leading professor and former urban school superintendent. Cubberley and his colleagues were engaged in an urban school project. They were creating schools for a swelling of the diverse populations in an industrializing America. With his experience in an urban setting, Cubberley championed rural school consolidation (Cubberley, 1934).

Cubberley's idea was that pupil-teacher ratios could be increased in the consolidation of schools. With the consolidation longer terms could be held, transportation could be provided, and a curriculum appropriate for rural schools could be offered to the children of farmers. Schools and districts could be supervised and led by trained educators. Professional educators could provide rural communities with scientific knowledge. Cubberley took the opposite stance of Kennedy by asking the question how large of a school could a community create? (Cubberley, 1934).

Howley (1996) examined the justifications for building larger schools and closing smaller ones. He looked at two aspects of the issue: administrative and instructional. The administrative motive keeps the economy of scale in clear view. This is the idea that larger schools will be able to use staff and other pertinent resources more effectively and efficiently. The instructional model pays a greater attention to the effectiveness of the educational strategies used in the school. These two motives divide the issue of school size because they lead to two separate paths about school size. These two perspectives echo Cubberley's and Kennedy's arguments. In the end Cubberley's work is remembered because of his stronger influence in the formation of larger schools (Howley, 1996).

Howley (1996) pointed out that the questions posed by Cubberley and Kennedy are still relevant. In fact, the two questions are most often combined into what are the upper and lower enrollment limits of an efficient or effective school? Restated this way, we are able to see that this question represents the common idea that all schools regardless of size share features so they are recognized as schools. An institution that is

intended to be a school but is too small may resemble a family unit, and one that is too large may resemble a factory or even a prison (Howley, 1996).

According to Robertson (2001) in the period from 1940 to 1990 the number of K – 12 schools in the United States declined by about 69%. Communities began consolidating the smaller schools into larger schools. Transportation made these consolidations more manageable. However, during the same period of time, there was a 70% increase in the United States population. Consolidations of schools during the 1950s were influenced by many different events. One such event was the "Space Race" with the Soviet Union. It appeared the United States needed larger schools to produce more scientists. In 1950 Conant published a pivotal study arguing for larger schools. Conant asserted that larger schools would be more cost efficient. They could also offer a more varied curriculum (as cited in Robertson, 2001). Stewart (2005) noted that since the middle of the 1970s there has been a great deal of attention by policy makers, educators, and parents concerning the size of school districts, campuses, and classes. In the last 2 decades, the interest has increased even more due to the reality that society has consistently called upon public educators in the United States to fulfill the increasing number of responsibilities that accompany the higher expectations and effectiveness required by federal, state, and local school districts (Stewart, 2005).

Stewart (2005) asserted that as the number of students enrolled in schools across the nation has risen, the concern for school size rose to the forefront. The ideal school size has been a source of contention. Stewart (2005, 2009) estimated that numbers greater than 900 students are generally considered to be large high schools. Stevenson (2006) and Stewart (2009) indicated that high schools with 400 to 900 students tend to

have higher academic success than larger schools. This interest in the optimal school and class size for students learning has been identified as a natural outgrowth of the accountability trend. The goal for secondary education is defining the most advantageous size of schools and classes that will produce the most ideal learning conditions to increase student achievement (Stevenson, 2006; Stewart, 2009). Swanson (2004) and Herlihy (2007) maintained the size of a school or the class size, if too large, can lead to declining motivation that, in turn, leads to increased disengagement of the students resulting in decreased performance.

Kahne, Sporte, de la Torre, and Easton (2006) referred to numerous studies which have found that smaller schools are associated with personally supportive and trusting environments for students. Because of greater personalization and instruction, small learning environments tend to have a greater focus on active learning and problem solving with students more engaged (National Forum to Accelerate Middle Grades, 2004). Giordano (2012) found that students who attend public high schools with approximately 100 students in each grade are more likely to graduate from high school. The study Giordano conducted tracked academic performance of more than 21,000 students from 2005 to 2008. Students attending the smaller schools had a higher graduation rate. This held for all students involved regardless of race, income, or test scores on each state's eighth grade math and reading tests. These small school students also displayed more evidence of college readiness with 37.3% of students earning a score of 75 or higher on English test compared with 29.7% of students at other schools. No difference was found in the math scores (Giordano, 2012). Kahne et al. pointed out that not all findings regarding the impact of small schools are positive. A study of small

schools conducted in Chicago found enhanced engagement with the students but no consistent impact on student achievement.

Student Transition from Eighth to Ninth Grade

Piaget (2003) defined the period of adolescence as the stage of formal-operational thinking that is the beginning of planning possible life paths. The idea is to move toward a stable identity with the ability to understand and appreciate others views and behaviors (Piaget, 2003). Cook, Fowler, and Harris (2008) concluded as adolescents face the social, emotional, physical, and intellectual challenges of this stage of development, it is easy for them to feel overwhelmed, confused, and alone. Cohen and Smerdon (2009) found that regardless of the effect the transition on students is often socially, emotionally, and academically significant. There are also differential effects on students by gender, race, ethnicity, and socioeconomic status. Neild (2009) viewed the transition into adolescence as not only a life transition but also an academic transition with students entering high school, which is normally a new school with new peers and support systems. Akos and Galassi (2004) ascertained that little empirical research existed for the transition of general education students moving from middle school to high school.

Cook et al. (2008) argued that ninth graders are adolescents undergoing the difficult transition from middle school to high school. Cohen and Smerdon (2009) concluded the middle school to high school transition has varying effects on students depending on their level of academic preparation for high school, emotional stability, and ability to adapt. Family situations and demographics are also significant to a student's transition; therefore, programs to ease the transition from middle and high school are valuable. Neild (2009) also identified that from the moment students enter high school in

the ninth grade the main task is to earn the required credits to graduate. Herlihy (2007) contended the transition into high school is a critical juncture for students. An unsuccessful transition can result in low achievement rates leading to low on-time graduation rates. Both could lead to high dropout rates. This makes it vital to identify what will work to ensure all students make the transition. NCLB placed a new focus on student achievement on the high school level. Graduation rates along with proficiency in reading and math became measurements. Schools, districts, and states had to show success or failure through adequate yearly progress (Herlihy, 2007).

Neild (2009) maintained that ninth grade in the United States is usually understood to represent the beginning of high school. With this start students are faced with a new set of academic standards as well as a new academic environment. Black (2004) analyzed an extensive study which shadowed ninth graders in 48 states and the District of Columbia. It was found that high schools offered little or no guidance to help ninth graders adjust academically and socially. Cook et al. (2008) suggested that the increasing number of nonpromoted ninth grade students both nationally and locally has become a critical focus point among all educators.

Cohen and Smerdon (2009) viewed the transition from middle to high school as a disruption in relationships with teachers and peers as students choose or are assigned to different high schools or different courses of study. Cohen and Smerdon and Neild (2009) characterized the entrance to the ninth grade as a social marker for freshman. At this time parents allow greater independence and students seek acceptance and inclusion in the social activities of peers their own age and older many of whom are new acquaintances. Roeser, Strohel, and Quihuis (2002) and Cohen and Smerdon reported

that some students find the decrease in parental involvement liberating and thrive on the competitive nature of high school, while other students who have struggled academically find the competitive nature of high school can take a negative toll on their performance and behaviors (Cohen & Smerdon, 2009; Roeser et al., 2002).

Neild (2009) pointed out that with the increase of the number of students; high schools can become more depersonalized and lose a sense of community. Balfanz and Letgers (2006) reasoned that ninth grade defeats many students who may have already been struggling and disengaged for 3 or more years before entering high school. Smith (2006) observed that the transition to high school presents new opportunities for some. For those who previously struggled in academics this is an opportunity to get a fresh academic start. Herlihy and Quint (2006) explained that students who are behind academically when they enter the ninth grade can make better progress if they receive special supports, including special courses designed to help them acquire the content knowledge and learning skills they may have missed out on in earlier grades. Cook et al. (2008) said taking a proactive approach to high school transition challenges is critical now, more than ever, to reverse the current trends.

Smith (2006) presented the idea some middle school personnel have recognized the challenges associated with the transition to high school and offer specific transitional programs to aid students in this change. Dixon et al. (2008) reported that high school and middle school counselors believed offering a realistic portrayal of what students should expect in high school was one of their highest priorities. These counselors emphasized the need for planning transition programs to high school to be a year-long process (Dixon et al., 2008). Neild (2009) declared that the task of successful transitions for ninth grade

students requires a dedication from educators. Neild indicated that although educators claim to be sensitive to the needs of their students, they most often do not emphasize interpersonal relationships with adolescents. Neild contended that academic preparation began at the pre-K level and continued until the eighth grade. Parental involvement and parental support is also the key to a smooth transition. Ultimately the educators at the high school level are immediately responsible for the appropriate curriculum, academically conducive school organization, and effective teachers who challenge students. School reform models and curriculum changes have started showing promise. Neild observed that student achievement is slowly beginning to rise as more thoughtful educational reforms are being implemented. Educators have begun to look at reforms that are research based. Data are being examined before decisions are made (Neild, 2009).

Dedmond et al. (2006) contended the benefits of a freshman transition program to be extensive. The creation of a transition program spawns enthusiasm and appreciation for the educational process. A transition program also helps students discover their identity and builds self-esteem by offering support, guidance, and counseling to help students develop education and career plans. A transition program that offers relevant themes for academic skill development has been found to improve pass rates from 9^{th} to 10^{th} grade. Successful transition programs are multidimensional. They have blended youth development approaches with contextual and authentic learning to include caring relationships, cognitive challenges, a culture of support, community, and connection to learning and career opportunities (Dedmond et al., 2006). Smith (2006) insisted that students who attend schools with explicit transition programs are more likely to

experience a smooth transition into high school than students who attend schools without this type of program.

Bloom, Thompson, and Unterman (2010) defined a successful transition into high school as being critical to a student's graduation. Students who are on track toward graduation at the end of their first year are three and a half times more likely to graduate in 4 years. Demond, Brown, and La Fauci (2006) presented that research indicating that students who participate in transitions that actively involve students, parents, and staff members are less likely to drop out of high school even when demographic and other information are held constant.

Neild (2009) investigated four theories that theorized why ninth grade is difficult for students. Neild first noticed that ninth grade coincides with life changes for the students. Parents begin to reduce supervision while peer influence increases. Neild's second observation was ninth grade typically requires a move to a new school which is the case for 80% of ninth grade students. At this time students will break bonds they have formed with teachers and peers. The third theory points out that in some instances students are not prepared for high school curriculum. Neild's fourth theory holds that the way the high school is organized could be the source of turmoil. Students are placed into a largely populated school and are to navigate through wings of the schools that are departmentalized. The departments are comprised of teachers who teach the same core content to students from the 9^{th} to the 12^{th} grade. Students are shown where each of these departments is located but then left to search and navigate the halls by themselves. Most of the evidence points to being inadequately prepared academically for high school curriculum. High school educators who serve the vast majority of American students are

fully aware of the anxiety, confusion, and frustration associated with becoming a ninth grader. Neild substantiated those students who are able to manage the transition to high school show a high probability of graduating on time. Those who fail to earn the required number of credits to be promoted to the 10th grade face a substantial risk of dropping out of school (Neild, 2009). Cohen and Smerdon (2009) asserted that the dropout crisis is especially acute during the first year of high school, as evident from large ninth grade enrollments and then a decrease in 10th grade enrollments.

Cook et al. (2008) reported that statistics indicate the importance of creating Ninth Grade Academies. Schools with operational transition programs like Ninth Grade Academies reflect a dropout rate of only 8% on average compared to schools without transition programs at an average of 24% higher. Swanson observed in 2004 that one third of public high school students were failing to graduate (Swanson, 2004). Balfanz and Letgers (2004) surmised that in 35 of the largest cities in the United States only 40% to 50% of ninth grade students graduate 4 years later. Cooney and Bottoms (2012) recommended that appropriate actions should be taken by decision makers and policy leaders to ensure successful transitions. When these actions are implemented, Cooney et al. reported that students would meet the expectations and demands of college as well as the modern workplace. These recommendations are research-based readiness indicators to gauge success with the high school curriculum. These recommendations require interaction between high school educators and students' families to understand the challenges both academically and socially in high school. They also require systems to fund programs for at-risk eighth graders who are not ready to take college preparatory math and English courses in high school. The high school should have a faculty that is

prepared to provide support so the students can meet the high rigorous standards of high school. The predictions are an increase in high graduation rates and more students being college ready when they do graduate (Cooney & Bottoms, 2012).

Smith (2006) found that high school dropout rates were significantly lower in schools with transition programs that included a demanding curriculum; quality faculty; and committed teachers, counselors, and administrators (Smith, 2006). Cook et al. (2008) determined that dropouts lose $10,000 dollars each year in income after age 25. Cook et al. (2008) and Cohen and Smerdon (2009) pointed out the social costs of this problem have never been higher. Statistics reported 1.3 million students who failed to graduate from high school will cost the nation more than $325 billion in lost wages, taxes, and productivity during the students' lifetimes. Cook et al. (2008) attributed other consequences of dropping out of school are incarceration, unemployment, reduction in wages, and engaging in high risk behavior. For each high school dropout, it costs a state approximately $3,000 to $5,000 per year.

Smaller Learning Communities

Barker and Gump (1964) suggested educational reform on the high school level that was corroborated by Goodlad (1984) 2 decades later. These researchers called for a redesign of the comprehensive high school into schools-within-schools (SWS). To combat the feeling of being lost within the sheer number of high school students, the formation of smaller subunits was recommended (Barker & Gump, 1964; Goodlad, 1984). Raywid (1996) documented that in the 30 years following the Barker and Gump research, a steady influx of support has accumulated for the conclusion that smaller schools are preferred over larger ones. Although support has grown, the reality of this

type of reform poses several problems. One problem is the schools that have been built over the past 75 years are still in use were designed for high student enrollments. Even if smaller schools are built to replace the larger one, the infrastructure for the larger schools has to be redesigned. This causes some decision makers to question the cost of building smaller schools and maintaining them. Then the problem becomes what to do with the existing buildings if smaller is better. The resulting conclusion is to adapt existing buildings to create the desired subunits, SWS. This has also been recommended as a solution for failing schools to create subunits within the building to focus more on parts of the school as opposed to the larger whole (Raywid, 1996).

Oxley (2005) compiled a brief history of small learning communities (SLC). These smaller subunits within a school began to emerge in the 1960s. The 1970s brought magnet programs, career academies, and minischools. The late 1980s through to the present day brought the charter schools movement. Finally, SLC began to emerge. Size of the communities and curriculum focus are the shared school of thought for SLC. SLC differ from other school subunit models as primary focus is the learner and the learning. SLC create conditions conducive to curriculum change and innovative teacher strategies. Size is a focal point but not the focus. Size is reported by Oxley to help improve the learning environment, but without the curricular changes and effective teaching, learning remains stagnate. Optimal SLC include interdisciplinary teaching, learning teams, rigorous curriculum, relevant instruction, and support not only in the building but on a district level (Oxley, 2005).

Oxley and Kassissien (2008) speculated about the need to promote a feeling and sense of community in the large high schools in the United States. National pressure to

improve the nation's educational standings mandated the reorganization of high schools into SLC. By 2000, SLC had become a national reform movement. As a result, the United States Department of Education under President Clinton funded multimillion dollar projects aimed at developing reform models for SLC. The interest still gains support as research points to the improvement of high school achievement scores. At this time, however, SLC is mainly seen on the freshman level in high schools. This focus is an effort to improve graduation rates. The research shows that success in SLC show improvement in achievement scores for students (Oxley & Kassissien, 2008).

Stevenson (2006) acknowledged that historically larger schools have been advertised as providing a more comprehensive curriculum than possible in smaller schools, while reducing per pupil operating costs. Many researchers and writers have pointed out that until relatively recently the trend across the country has been to create larger schools through consolidation and restructuring. As a result, during the past 75 years in the United States, the number of school buildings has decreased from 250,000 to approximately 90,000. At the same time the K-12 public school enrollment has risen from about 28,000,000 students to over 53,000,000. It appears at first look that larger schools are more cost effective to operate (Stevenson, 2006). Stewart (2009) contended that with schools facing issues related to high stakes testing and rising costs associated with graduation, it has never been more important than now to rethink the size of our public schools.

Stewart (2009) made the observation that district, campus, and class size issues have become a popular topic among educators. The literature generally refers to small high schools as those with fewer than 400 pupils enrolled. Howley and Howley (2006)

suggested that rural and small-town communities perhaps feel the pressure for consolidation most acutely, particularly those with vulnerable economies and limited political leverage. Despite research evidence that demonstrates the advantages of smaller schools and districts, especially for low-income students, many states continue to pass regulations that require or strongly encourage small districts to consolidate or to close their small schools and replace them with larger, consolidated schools (Howley & Howley, 2006).

Howley and Howley (2006) reported many of the claims made for smaller schools have been made under the pressure of change and are difficult to warrant empirically. However several claims are well established: children from lower socioeconomic backgrounds have higher achievement in smaller schools thus making the link between poverty and achievement weaker in smaller schools; dropout rates are found to be lower in smaller schools; student engagement is higher in smaller schools; and contrary to former beliefs, small high schools can offer appropriate curriculums.

National Forum (2004) reported that students in small schools are usually grouped more in heterogeneous and flexible arrangements with all students receiving the same challenging core academic curriculum. Hopkins (2005) suggested that small rural schools offer a sense of community not found in their larger urban counterparts. Stewart (2005) and Hager (2006) summarized key advantages of small schools. One of the academic benefits is that administrators of small schools could more easily change curricula and teaching as needed. Another academic benefit is that attendance could be more easily recognized and teachers could encourage students to stay in school. The increased interaction between teachers and students creates positive and supportive

relationships. Student accountability could be increased because it is easier for teachers to be aware of student performance. Social benefits were found in that students have a greater sense of belonging. Bonding occurs between students, teachers, and administrators. The students are known by most of the adults in the school. By having this day to day relationship, teachers and administrators are more aware of the student's emotional wellbeing (Hager, 2006; Stewart, 2005).

Bloom (2010) advocated when schools are purposefully organized around smaller, personalized units of adults and students that students have a better chance of being noticed and known personally. In these situations these teachers have a better chance of knowing enough about their students to provide appropriate academic and socio-emotional supports (Bloom, 2010). Stevenson (2006) found documentation from previous studies that smaller schools produce better academic results along with providing a better student climate. Stewart (2005) proposed that having a school climate conducive to student participation is important for students living in "at-risk" situations, by providing increased opportunities for these students to be involved. Stevenson (2006) pointed out that studies have indicated smaller schools allow more opportunities for students to be involved in cocurricular activities and offer more personalization and individual attention. Educators teaching in small learning communities and in small schools report they have a greater efficacy with their teaching (National Forum, 2004).

Quint (2006) assessed some of the biggest challenges after making the decision to implement SLC in class and student scheduling. A great deal of planning has to be done to anticipate the effects of the changes on the students and the demands on personnel. Then finally choosing the model that is best fit for the school and district becomes

paramount. Quint summarized three comprehensive initiatives; Career Academies, First Thing First, and Talent Development (Quint, 2006).

Career Academies chose the model of a "school-within-a-school". The school-within-a-school is a separate school within a larger school. The smaller school has its own faculty and staff. Research suggests that this model has met with varied success. Career Academics integrated a core academic curriculum and occupational curriculum. Employer partnerships from within the community were established to provide career awareness activities for the students. Once these partnerships and activities were established, students were given opportunities for work internships (Quint, 2006).

Quint, Bloom, Black, and Stephens (2005) examined First Things First which is a reform model intended to transform elementary, middle, and high schools serving populations of economically disadvantaged students. The three main components of the model is small learning communities; an advocate system that pairs staff members and students that monitor students' progress and serves as a bridge between school and family; and instructional improvements to make instruction to be more rigorous, engaging, and more closely aligned with state standards as well as state assessments (Quint et al., 2005).

Quint (2006) evaluated the Talent Development that focused on a ninth grade academy that provided remedial courses in reading and math for ninth grade students with low skills. Extra support was provided to these students to prepare them for the remaining 3 years of high school. The academy implemented extended block schedules to provide increased academic support for all the students. Once students were promoted

to the 10th through the 12th grade they are transitioned into career academies (Quint, 2006).

Quint (2006) asserted that students within all three reforms had positive feedback. All reported small learning communities made them feel as if they were connected to the teachers. The teachers knew who they were and cared about their educational success. As a result, the students are eager to participate and be engaged in their education. Herlihy and Quint (2006) contended that transforming school into small learning communities and assigning student to faculty advisors can increase students' feelings of connectedness to their teachers. This can lead to increased student engagement that leads to an increase in student achievement.

Kahne et al. (2006) studied the *Chicago High School Reform Initiative* (CHSRI). The schools chosen for the initiative were the lowest performing schools in Chicago Public Schools. CHSRI started with freshmen and placed them into cohorts. These students were a little more likely to be on-track to graduate than students who were attending comparable schools. The differences, however, were not statistically significant. The first cohort of CHSRI schools cumulative 3 year dropout rate was 7% lower than comparable schools in the Chicago Public Schools. Evidence was found that small schools promote increased student attendance, more equitable access to academically demanding courses, more equitable gains in achievement, and lower dropout rates. Kahne et al. speculated that the personal and supportive contexts for both teachers and students have influenced the differences in dropout rates and absences (2006).

Bloom et al. (2010) and Bloom and Unterman (2012) examined New York City schools. During the past decade, a district wide reformation of the high schools has been implemented. This reformation is unprecedented with its scope, scale, and pace. Between the fall of 2002 and the fall of 2008, the school district closed 23 large failing high schools. These high schools were those with graduation rates below 45%. At the heart of the reform were 123 small, academically nonselective, public schools. Each school had approximately 100 students per grade in grades 9 through 12. These schools were created with the sole purpose of serving the districts with the most disadvantaged students. The schools were located in the neighborhoods of the schools that were closed due to a lack of progress and were considered failing schools (Bloom et al., 2010; Bloom et al., 2012). Bloom, Thompson, and Unterman (2010) observed that New York City school reform saw that by the end of the first year of smaller schools 58.5% of in student were on-track to graduate. This was a 48.5% increase (Bloom et al., 2010). Giordano (2012) proposed that the small schools initiative in New York City schools was the hallmark of Mayor Bloomberg's administration. This was corroborated through a study by *Manpower Demonstration Research Corporation* that found that the initiative continues to see increases in academic achievement (Giordano, 2012).

Evans et al. (2006) completed a study commissioned by *The Gates Foundation* that looked at 50 schools. The schools involved were both newly created and redesigned or conversion schools. Researchers found a more positive climate in the new smaller schools. This included a more collegial relationship between teachers and students as compared with more traditional high schools (Evans et al., 2006). In 2010 it was concluded that school size had little significance in student success, but teacher quality

did prove significant (Bloom et al., 2010). David (2008) noted that although some small learning communities are newly created small schools, most result from converting large high school into several subdivided units. These units are usually identified by a theme or become autonomous schools with their own administration and budget. Evans et al. concluded that successful small learning communities rarely result from breaking up large high schools.

Quint (2006) pointed out that implementing small learning communities can improve school climate, but that alone will not increase student achievement. Small learning communities can increase attendance and reduce dropout rates. This is especially true with separate ninth grade academies. Students who enter the ninth grade facing substantial academic deficits can make progress with special support. To accomplish this two important components are needed: caring teachers and remedial courses designed to close the gap of the missing content knowledge (Quint, 2006). David (2008) continued with the school of thought that school climate alone will not increase student achievement. David emphasized that plans for improving the classroom environment should be as explicit as the plans for changing the school's structure.

Wilder (2006) examined achievement within small learning communities. Wilder found that small learning communities show high SAT scores along with higher scores on state standardized tests. Students who are in small learning communities have higher achievement in honors level classes as well as in advanced placement classes. Small learning communities have also accounted for an increase in the number of students entering 2- and 4- year colleges. Hopkins (2005) analyzed achievement in smaller rural schools. Hopkins found that students in the smaller rural schools scored higher on the

ACT than their urban counterparts with comparable class and school sizes. A study conducted in Tennessee found similar results when measuring the mathematics achievement of middle and high school students.

Stevenson (2006) and Stewart (2009) investigated other subgroups of students and their achievement based on school size. Both studies found that economically disadvantaged students perform better in small schools. However, students from more affluent backgrounds were found to perform better in larger settings. Stewart noted that on further investigation of additional studies on the correlation between high school size and achievement that mixed results were common.

Freshman Academies

In *Goals 2000*, President Bill Clinton and the Nation's Governors had six objectives identified. One of the six objectives was to increase high school graduation rates nationally to 90% (Goals, 2000). Fulk (2003) documented that the year 2000 has come and gone without the goal of 90% graduation rate being accomplished exacerbating the problem of students failing to complete high school. Fulk did note that students were less likely to drop out of high school if they experienced some form of success at school. Students were more likely to graduate if they felt connected to adults and peers at school. This brought Fulk to the conclusion that the freshman year was critical to students' success or failure in high school (Fulk, 2003).

Quint (2006) and Herlihy and Quint (2006) stated that the twin pillars of high school reform are structural changes to improve personalization and to improve instruction. Styron and Peasant (2010) contended that school administrators found that ninth grade students who are placed in situations for which they are not yet prepared, like

high school, often result in low student achievement and higher dropout rates. Over the past few decades, school administrators have strived to find a solution. Ninth grade has been targeted by researchers as the time students are the least prepared. Assisting ninth grade students in making a smooth transition to high school provides a safe, positive path to deal with many challenges during the peak of their adolescent years (Styron & Peasant, 2010). Cook et al. contended that the freshman academy promoted the change needed to ease the transition into the high school (2008).

Hager (2006) suggested some larger schools are trying to become more like smaller schools by creating smaller learning communities within the physical structure of the larger school in the creation of freshman academies. Cushman (2006) recommended the configuration of all freshmen by locating them in the same physical space and placing them on academic teams. The teachers are responsible for the academic and emotional support of these students. This assists in alleviating the anxiety of being in a new building and being around new people. Some of the students are entering a larger student population than they have ever experienced at a school prior to their freshman year. The freshman academy using the team model makes the transition a manageable adjustment. Cushman reported a positive by product of this is the bonding that occurs among the students. The relationships between students and teachers appear to be stronger in a freshman academy. This relationship opens communication between teachers and students. This communication becomes critical for students who are struggling. Students who come into the freshman academy unprepared need the assurance of these open lines of communication (Cushman, 2006). Allensworth and Easton (2007) concluded that a strong relationship with the teacher can counteract a student's lack of preparation.

Wheelock and Miao (2005) advocated the improvement of student and teacher relationships to increase student achievement.

Thornton (2009) pointed out with the increased demands in accountability from NCLB a closer look at Freshman Academies was a growing need. She found that the mean number of credits earned were higher in the schools that implemented freshman academies by a comparison of the number of credits earned by freshman in a traditional high school to those is a freshman academy. Kelley (2010) looked at student outcomes. The outcomes studied were graduation rates, attendance rates, instances of out-of-school suspensions, and expulsions. Kelley found a significant difference in the instances of out-of-school suspensions for schools that have a freshman academy and traditional high schools. The freshman academies had fewer instances of out-of-school suspensions. No significant difference was found between graduation rates of those who attended the freshman academy and the traditional high school.

Teffeteller (2010) compared high schools in East Tennessee before and after implementation of freshman academies. Within the study she examined the number of core credits earned. She discovered that more core and elective credits were earned after the implementation of the ninth grade academy. Within the study Teffeteller noted there was little positive impact in Algebra I credits earned after the implementation of the ninth grade academy. A closer look at mathematics in general found that after implementation more students earned Algebra I credits than those taking basic math.

Leonard (2011) and Samuelson (2011) evaluated the implementation of ninth grade academies. The purpose of these studies was to examine the ninth grade academy as a strategy to improve attendance, promotion rates, and test scores. Leonard (2011)

found a significant difference in promotion of freshman who attended a freshman academy. Over 30 more students were promoted to the 10th grade after the implementation of the ninth grade academy. Samuelson (2011) found a significant difference between on-time promotions for students in the ninth grade academy during their first year of high school. However, there was not a significant difference between the study groups in the Algebra I and English I end-of-course exam scores. Students who were part of a ninth grade academy scored about the same as students who were in a traditional high school. Although no significant difference was found, the difference was close enough for future examination. A significant difference was found in the number of ninth grade students who were promoted on time in the ninth grade academy (Leonard, 2011; Samuelson, 2011).

Shakrani (2008) stated that students in freshman academies perform better academically than those in traditional high school settings. This was significant for decision makers in educational reform. By providing a program of intervention in the freshman year, students will have a greater chance of graduating (Shakrani, 2008). Styron and Peasant (2010) contended that students enrolled in ninth grade academies out performed students in traditional high schools in Algebra I by more than 15 points on the subject area tests and nearly 25 points higher on Biology I test. Dedmond (2005) concluded that whether a stand-alone ninth grade academy or the school is restructured to provide extra support for the freshman, the main challenge is how to get 13 and 14 year olds to see past next week. Teachers and administrators need to be prepared to address this within the school. This creates a plethora of challenges for educators. Researchers such as Oxley and Kassissien (2008) and Bloom (2010) have suggested that an increased

sense of belonging could combat this challenge. This sense of belonging improves attendance, participation, academic achievement, and graduation rates.

As stated by Quint (2006) and Herlihy and Quint (2006) one of the twin pillars of high school reform is to improve instruction. Dedmond (2008) and Thornton (2009) echoed the recruiting of teachers who are effective instructional leaders and classroom managers as being a critical element for success for freshman academies. Wheelock and Miao (2005) suggested that in conjunction with effective teachers extra academic support needs to be provided early. The students receiving academic support need to be closely monitored throughout the entire year. According to Donegan (2008), a successful transition into high school is a process that is ongoing. The process is one that is difficult to accomplish successfully in a limited amount of time.

Summary

Educational demands on students and teachers in the 21st century have increased significantly. Educators have to adapt to federal and state guidelines while maintaining the primary focus of educating the students. The gauntlet has been dropped, and failure is not an option. Reform to make students successful is the most popular solution. The present trend is SLC in the form of freshman academies. Providing students a firm foundation is one way to prepare them to be successful in high school and to become productive citizens as adults.

CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

Introduction

Chapter 3 is the methodology of a mixed methods study that evaluated the implementation of a Freshman Academy in East Tennessee. In the qualitative portion of this study is a series of interviews with two administrators and six teachers who have experience with the implementation of the freshman academy and the student achievement at the freshman academy. The quantitative portion of this study examined the data from the End of Course (EOC) exams for both Algebra I and English I and a comparison of course failures by freshmen in 2010-2011 pre Freshman Academy with 2011-2012 post-Freshman Academy by a chi square analysis.

Qualitative Measures

Research Design

Three qualitative research questions were used to guide this study. They are:

1. What was the process of the implementation of the Freshman Academy?
2. What was the administrator's perception of the student's freshman experience academically and emotionally before and after implementation of the Freshman Academy?
3. What was the teacher's perception of the student's freshman experience academically and emotionally before and after implementation of the Freshman Academy?

Interview Process

The primary purpose of interviewing as a qualitative research method is to gain insight into the interviewee's perception of the study. The interviewing process begins with an assumption that the perception of others is meaningful and the participants are able to articulate that meaningfulness (Patton, 2010). The advantages of interviews are the relative absence of bias from the observer or participants, the flexibility in exploring themes while gathering data; the participants were asked to describe what is important in their own words; and the questions can be clarified for the participants to avoid confusion. The disadvantages of interviews are as follows: participants may divulge more information than intended; analyzing and interpreting qualitative data is time consuming; more subjective than quantitative research methods; and participants may or may not be truthful in the interviews (Sewell, 2013).

As the researcher, I completed interviews with two building level administrators and six ninth grade teachers asking open-ended questions. By using open-ended questions those being interviewed were allowed to take the conversation in the direction of their choosing. This also allowed me to ask follow-up questions based on the participants statements.

The interviews were conducted on site at the Freshman Academy. I met with participants at their convenience in a place of their choosing. The goal was to make them as comfortable as possible. I began the interview with collegial dialogue about education and their teaching careers. I gleaned much more than data for this study. The participants and I shared valuable teaching strategies and ideas that I will be able to use in my own classroom. Once rapport was established, I began asking the interview

questions. The interviews were recorded to allow for the gathering of all information that could be gleaned from the participants. The data were then transcribed, analyzed, and compared continually throughout the study to allow for patterns and themes to emerge as the study was completed.

Population

For this study a purposeful sample was used. Patton (2002) identified the logic and power of the purposeful sample to be an in-depth understanding that leads to information-rich cases. When used in a case study, a purposeful sample emphasizes the research questions under scrutiny. The purposeful sample for the qualitative portion of the study chosen was faculty and administrators at a newly implemented Freshman Academy. The Freshman Academy contains approximately 600 students who are 94% Caucasian and 61% economically disadvantaged (Report Card, 2012). During the 2010-2011 school year the decision was made to create a wing on the main high school campus to house the freshman. The reasoning was to prepare the faculty for the eventual move to the off campus site that is in the process of being built as a separate Freshman Academy.

Data Collection

Patton (2002) suggested that researchers and evaluators when analyzing qualitative data they strive to understand the program under study as a whole. This required an in-depth description and interpretation of the Freshman Academy's internal as well as the external context. This was essential for overall understanding of what was observed during the interviews (Patton, 2002). Prior to the beginning of the research study permission was obtained from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at East Tennessee State University.

Bias

Issues that have the potential to bias this study are the researcher's impassioned interest in the topic due to the researcher having children at this milestone in their educational careers. This was addressed by focusing as an educator observing an educational reform. Observer bias needed to also be addressed to recognize that only one observer was used for the study. The timing of the study ran concurrent with the preparation of the opening of a separate building to house the Freshman Academy was also a bias to be of concern when administrators were interviewed.

Data Analysis

The data collected during the interview process were analyzed through the entire research project. Once the interviews were transcribed and field notes examined, the process described by Lincoln and Guba (1985) of categorizing the data so that each piece of information could be used individually was in place. According to McMillian and Schumaker (2010) and others (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007; Creswell, 2008; Patton, 2002), the analyzing of the data collected from the interview could then be categorized with the use of setting and context, the situation, the participants' perspectives, relationships, social structure, activities, and events. This completed the first process of data reduction for analysis (Bogdon & Biklen, 2007; Creswell, 2009; McMillian & Schumaker, 2010; Patton, 2002).

After the data were coded from units to categories, McMillian and Schumaker (2010) suggest examining for patterns from the categorized and coded information. At this stage themes should being to emerge. This occurs after numerous examinations of the transcriptions and field notes (McMillian & Schumaker, 2010).

Validity and Reliability

Lincoln and Guba (1986) proposed that constructivist inquiry demanded different criteria from the traditional social sciences. They suggested credibility as equal to internal validity, transferability as equal to external validity, dependability as equal to reliability, and confirm ability as equal to objectivity. All of these combine to form the trustworthiness that is a parallel to the rigor of the study (Lincoln & Guba, 1986).

As the researcher, I strived for credibility by showing a true picture of the freshman academy from the planning stages to the implementation. I used information gleaned from the interviews of various personnel involved. To attain transferability I described the accommodations for the freshman academy, the team modeling for the teachers and students, and curriculum. I took care as the researcher to set aside any predispositions so that the findings would be derived from the research.

Lincoln and Guba (1985) were concerned that when conducting qualitative research that trustworthiness emerges as an issue. Lincoln and Guba also suggested that trustworthiness is convincing your audience that the findings in your study are meaningful and worthwhile. Obtaining trustworthy data allows for time spent developing stronger relationships that allows for better data to be collected (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Spending numerous days with faculty and administration over the last few months allowed for strong relationships to be built prior to the interviews. This built trust through conversations, observations of the teacher's classrooms, sharing of teaching ideas, and participation in group collaborative discussions prior to interviews, which resulted in deeper knowledge and understanding of the Freshman Academy.

Denzin (1988) asserted that triangulation involved the incorporation of numerous sources of data, investigators, and theoretical perspectives can be used to improve the confidence in the researcher's findings (Denzin, 1988). Triangulation of qualitative data according to Patton (2010) means cross-checking data to verify its accuracy; comparing observations with interviews; checking for consistency of what people report about the same phenomenon; comparing the perspectives of people from different points of view; and checking interviews against program documents and other written evidence that will corroborate the information obtained through interviews (Patton, 2010).

Triangulation was achieved through the transcribing of field notes and recorded interviews of faculty and administration of the Freshman Academy. Denzin and Lincoln (2011) recommended the critical component of member checking that was used to establish credibility. Those interviewed were allowed to check the data, the analysis, interpretations, and conclusions to be evaluated for accuracy. Finally, copies of the interview transcripts and field notes were sent to members to also check the information for accuracy. I made any corrections and addendums to the field notes and had the members of the study reevaluate for final approval. This ensured the trustworthiness that was needed in this study (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). As the researcher I, checked for consistency with the interview questions and the responses from the transcribed interviews. Themes began to emerge from the examination of this information. I examined the data for improvement in student achievement from before and after the implementation from the report card and the data obtained from the guidance counselor.

Ethical Considerations

Denzin (1988) cited that researchers bring preconceptions and interpretations to the phenomenon being studied (Denzin, 1988). To help counteract this inherent bias Patton (2010) described reflexivity. Reflexivity is being aware of specific perceptions and behaviors. For this study I was aware of my own personal interest due to having a child at the freshman academy. As Patton suggested I was consciously aware of my perspective (Patton, 2010). I continuously focused on the purpose of the study. I focused on the data and the interviews. To assist in my perspective, becoming a limitation in the study Denzin and Lincoln recommended using peer debriefing, which is the process in which the researcher asks for assistance from a peer who is not involved in the research project (Denzin and Lincoln, 2011). Colleagues were asked to assist. These colleagues were Johnny Henry, Melissa Hensley, Jone Jones-Boak, and Lynn Cutshall.

Quantitative Measures

Research Design

Three research questions were used to guide the quantitative part of this study. They are:

1. Is there a significant difference in EOC scores for Algebra I before (2010-2011) and after (2011-2012) the implementation of the Freshman Academy?

H_o1_1: There is no significant difference in EOC scores for Algebra I after the implementation of the Freshman Academy.

2. Is there a significant difference in EOC scores for English I before (2010-2011) and after (2011-2012) the implementation of the Freshman Academy?

H_o2_1: There is no significant difference in EOC scores for English I after the implementation of the Freshman Academy.

3. Is there a significant difference in the number of students failing their freshman year before (2010-2011) and after (2011-2012) the implementation of the Freshman Academy?

H_o3_1: There is no significant difference in students failing their freshman year before and after the implementation of the Freshman Academy.

A nonexperimental quantitative research design was used for this part of the study. McMillian and Schumaker (2010) described this type of design as being descriptive in nature and used to examine relationships without any direct manipulation of the variables by the researcher. This design is also considered to be *ex post facto*, which explores possible causal relationships among variables that cannot be controlled by the researcher. An *ex post facto* design emphasizes that the phenomenon occurred in the past (McMillian & Schumaker, 2010).

Population

As with the qualitative portion of this study, the quantitative study also used a purposeful sample. The population consisted of two groups of freshman at a comprehensive high school, one in the traditional high school setting and the other in an isolated wing of the high school, in rural Tennessee from 2010 to 2012. All the students took EOC exams for Algebra I and English I. There were approximately 1,200 students scores involved in this study.

Data Collection

Freshman data from the year prior to the implementation of the Freshman Academy, which is the 2010-2011 school year, and the year after implementation (2011 – 2012) were used. The data were obtained from the high school guidance counselor. The EOC scores of approximately 529 students were compared to the 579 of freshman in the 2011-2012 school who attended the Freshman Academy. I looked at the number of students scoring proficient both years in Algebra I and English I. In addition, I examined the number of students who failed freshman year causing these students to be delayed from being on track to graduate in 4 years. Data were also obtained from the teachers and administrators interviewed for this study. In addition, information was also gathered from the Tennessee Department of Education via the Annual Report Card for the school and the school district.

Data Analysis

Data for this portion of the study were analyzed using a chi square statistical analysis. *SPSS for Windows* was used to find the statistical calculations on all three quantitative questions.

Summary

Chapter 3 presented the methodology used in this mixed methods study. First, it outlined the qualitative research design, the interview process, population, data analysis, and validity and reliability. Second, it outlined quantitative design, research questions, population, data collection, data analysis, and the summary.

CHAPTER 4

FINDINGS

Introduction

Chapter 4 details the finding of qualitative and quantitative research questions for this study. The purpose of this study was to compare student achievement prior to and after the implementation of a freshman academy in a rural school district. Student achievement was defined for this study as EOC scores for Algebra I and English I along with the rates for the freshman who failed the ninth grade for the two freshman classes before implementation of the freshman academy and after implementation. The freshman academy was implemented to improve student achievement with the final goal of increasing the graduation rate.

Chapter 4 contains the qualitative analysis and includes the timeline of the implementation of the freshman academy and interviews with administrators and teachers. The quantitative analysis includes a comparison of student failure rates for freshman, EOC scores for Algebra, and EOC scores for English I prior to and after the implementation of the freshman academy. This data were collected from guidance counselors and administrators at the freshman academy.

Qualitative Measures

Analysis of Research Questions

Implementation of the freshman academy. The implementation process interviews focused on the collaboration of central office, administrators, faculty of the high school, and staff of the high schools main campus. The decision was made to use existing classrooms to create a freshman academy while a new building was constructed

off of the main campus. The focus of this dissertation was the implementation of the freshman academy located on the main campus.

Administrators and teachers were interviewed to obtain a timeline of the implementation process. The information gathered was organized into the following timeline:

November 2010 - the freshman academy went into the official planning stage at the parent high school. The freshman academy concept had been previously discussed by administrators from the host high school and central office staff for numerous months prior to November of 2010. It was at this time the official decision was made to proceed. Administrators began by getting input from the teachers and presenting research that has been used to increase student achievement by other schools in the local area that have implemented freshman academies. At the end of the input process, it was reported that all the faculty and staff were in agreement that a freshman academy would be in the best interest of the students they serve.

January 2011- teacher team leaders for the freshman academy were chosen and began meeting as a group. The first task was to visit other schools that have similar student populations and student achievement prior to the implementation of the freshman academies on the campuses. Central office staff, building administrators, and the teacher team leaders were given a specific aspect of the other academies to explore and research on the visits. They were responsible for bringing this information back to the parent high school and determine the usefulness in the planning of the freshman academy.

March 2011- the teams of teachers were created. They began meeting. The observations from the existing academies were shared with the teams of teachers. Brainstorming began on the blueprint to be used for the freshman academy. The teachers were charged with the task of having a working blueprint by April 2011.

April 2011- team leaders for the freshman academy created the blueprint for the academy. The mission statement, rules, and regulations were decided upon and shared with the remaining freshman faculty. From that point the discipline policies and curricular structure was decided. At this time the physical placement of the students was decided. The parent high schools have numerous mobile units that are used as classrooms. The decision was made to make this a wing to be used for the freshman academy while a new building was being built an eighth of a mile from the main campus.

May 2011- the blueprint for the freshman academy was finalized. Any physical obstacles or additions needed for the implementation of the freshman academy were completed in preparation for the fall. The focus changed from the physical housing of the freshman and the program of study for the freshman to the emotional needs of the incoming freshman. Throughout the summer the team leaders met to plan for activities that provide the added emotional support that the freshman and the parents of these freshmen. Plans were also made to successfully introduce the freshman academy to the community.

The following themes emerged from interviews on the implementation process: staffing the freshman academy, obstacles on campus, and concerns with delaying transition into the general population of the high school.

Staffing the freshman academy. The teacher selection process was twofold: a portion of the teachers were selected based on patience and the teachers ability to work with freshman students, and others volunteered due to their desire to work with the freshman students. Emphasis was placed on teachers who would be positive and energetic. The final selection for the teaching staff was based on the teachers' previous success.

- Administrator A commented that the staffing decisions were based heavily on teachers who had worked with the age group and were successful academically with these students. We also looked heavily at years of experience, advanced degrees, past teaching assignments, and willingness to serve as sponsors and mentors at the freshman academy.
- Administrator B added that the old idea that your best teachers get the advanced placement or honors upper grade classes was addressed. While we did not make personnel decisions solely on that basis, we believe that the success of students start with the freshman year. With that in mind we wanted to place some of our best teachers in the freshman academy. We determined who were our best teachers based on student evaluations, teacher evaluations test scores, and prior experience.
- Teacher E stated that the administrative staff went through and hand selected teachers who were excited about working with the freshmen and who are strong teachers in their content area. We were asked to read designated articles on the model that was going to be used in the academy.

- Teacher F further stated that the best teachers were placed in the academy with an emphasis placed on those who desired to work with freshmen and what specific strengths and skills they offer to the academy.

Obstacles. Restructuring the main campus was the greatest concern of those interviewed. The two areas of concern with the restructuring were as follows: isolation of the freshmen and moving teachers into the portable classrooms that would serve as the freshmen academy.

The primary component of a freshman academy is the isolation of the freshman class from the upper classman. This allows freshmen to gain the maturity and confidence needed to succeed throughout high school as noted by Bloom, who stated that SLC promotes more teacher awareness of the student's academic needs and a student's emotional needs (Bloom, 2010). With the freshman academy being a part of the main campus, the issue of freshman students intermingling with upper classman is a concern. Several of the electives available to the students are multigrade level classes such as band, color guard, chorus, and JROTC.

- Teacher E commented that although the students are isolated for core classes, they are still influenced by upper classmen during electives. This created complicated issues for the freshmen that the freshman academy was supposed to decrease due to isolation of the freshmen. However, this limited isolation did provide an opportunity for freshmen to demonstrate their new found maturity and confidence in a limited capacity.

- Teacher G added that concern with the freshmen being considered a part of the whole school quickly became an issue. With the freshmen being isolated, it became an issue of acceptance from the upper classmen. This created issues of resentment from the upper classmen because of the extra support given to the freshmen. This is an issue we as a faculty are still looking for ways to offset these feelings of resentment through other programs. This is an ongoing process.

The other obstacle that came out in the interviews was the moving of the teachers into the portables. Once the decision was made to use the portable classrooms as the freshman academy, a few renovations had to be made. One of which was a sheltered walkway had to be constructed connecting all the portables. This was in addition to the maintenance issues of older portables. Then the issue of moving teachers into their new classrooms both into the portables and others back into the main building. All of this has to be accomplished over summer break.

- Administrator B expressed their opinion that this was the biggest obstacle due to the magnitude of such a move. This took a great deal of planning and cooperation from teachers, custodians, maintenance workers, and volunteers.
- Teacher H added that being on a teaching team created a new learning environment. This was an adjustment, but the most overwhelming part of this journey was the physical part of moving into the portable classroom. Packing a classroom and then moving was extremely stressful. Due to being such a large undertaking, it was extremely important to get support from everyone involved. The sacrifice of time and energy that was being asked of them was enormous.

Concerns of delayed transition and isolation from upper classmen. Isolating the freshmen from the remaining student population raised questions and concerns from faculty. All of those who were interviewed agreed that placing a greater emphasis on the emotional and educational support would increase the students' success through the remaining time in the high school. The concerns expressed were delaying the inevitable for another year. The question that arose was will the sophomore year become the difficult year.

Another concern expressed was the freshmen not being considered a part of the high school. The freshmen will not make connections with the upper classmen and become a part of the school climate.

- Administrator A stated as an administrator, I am concerned the freshman will have limited access to the older students to have these older students serve as role models. With this in mind, a great deal of effort needs to be put into successfully planning the intermingling of freshmen and older students during elective classes.
- Administrator B echoed this concern. Freshmen can learn so much from the upper classmen and this learning curve may not be as great if we orchestrated appropriate interactions between the classes.
- Teacher D expressed a concern that there will still be a transition for the students going into the sophomore year. The academic foundation is built in the freshman year, but will the struggle become more of an emotional transition. We hope that the confidence gained throughout their freshman year will carry over into the sophomore year.

- Teacher E stated the greatest difference between freshmen and upper classmen that I have observed is not academic; it's social. Having freshmen isolated allows a school to deal with their unique needs without stopping the learning and growing process for other students. The question then becomes will they have social issues when they become sophomores. In my past observations the answer is no. Students mature a great deal between their freshman year and their sophomore year, especially after having experienced success in their freshman year.

The researcher observed a conundrum. The interviewees were concerned with the negative influences from older students due to the inability to completely isolate the freshmen. The interviewees were also concerned with the lack of interaction with the older students who would be positive role models. Upon further inquiry by the researcher, the following comments were noted.

- Administrator A stated that the social interaction between the freshman academy students and upper classmen is delicate. We are striving to find an appropriate balance. We believe that we will find this balance through the implementation of other programs and building a strong foundation in the freshman year from here on out.
- Administrator B added, that we have hand selected upper classmen for their character and their accomplishments to be clerical aids at the freshman academy. We feel that by seeing older students in leadership, roles they will serve as role models and mentors for the freshmen.

- Teacher E commented that we are working on activities to bridge the social gap between the freshmen and upper classmen.

Administrator and teacher interviews. The administrators and teachers interviewed have been involved with the freshmen academy since the inception. All the educators were part of the implementation process. The decision for these educators to become a part of the freshman academy came from their desire to work with the freshmen and their success in academics.

The following themes emerged from the administrator and teacher interviews: impact of the freshmen academy on student achievement, greater focus on the students, sense of community, and concern with limited electives for the freshmen.

Impact of the freshman academy on student achievement. The primary goal for the freshman academy is to increase student achievement. When making the decisions on the implementation of the freshman academy, data from previous freshmen classes were analyzed. The decisions were research based, but observations of teachers and faculty were also considered to account for the unique needs of this school's student population.

- Administrator A stated that giving them time to mature in a supportive and nurturing environment has built confidence in more freshmen than before, as this is the goal for freshman academies.
- Teacher E observed that a considerable improvement stating that 90% of our freshmen from the academy passed five out of their six classes taken freshmen year. The year before the implementation of the freshman academy 20% of

the freshman failed their freshman year. The year of the implementation of the freshman academy about 12% of the freshman failed their freshman year.

- Teacher G further stated that since the implementation, students have performed better on state assessments in English I and Algebra I.
- Teacher D who has taught freshmen for 15 years did not feel as positive about the impact on student learning by stating that students who are going to succeed will regardless of the academy. These are the students who desire to learn.

Greater Focus on the Students. Decreasing the size of the whole learning environment by implementing smaller learning communities should help identify at risk students. This was accomplished at the freshman academy by placing the students on one of four teams with six core teachers; two math, two English, one science, and one history. A greater focus on the students academically and emotionally could become more easily managed and become a focus. The expected by product is a greater interest from the students in their education.

- Administrator A stated that if kids are struggling, the teams of teachers are able to identify them early and work together as a unit with other teachers, staff, and parents to get these kids back on track. Administrator A further commented the students were given the opportunity to grow and mature with other students at the same developmental stage. The realization that freshmen are very different socially from juniors and seniors has presented opportunities to assist freshmen in becoming confident before being brought into the main campus and left to their

own accord. Before this could be an issue if they were socially delayed or unprepared, failure in the freshman year was eminent.

- Administrator B commented, a third of the freshman come to the high school from feeder schools with fewer than 600 students from kindergarten to the eighth grade. They are placed into a high school with 2,400 students and easily become lost. Those who are academically unprepared historically have trouble earning the credits needed to graduate. Upon reflection of the past freshman classes, it was found that the freshman year was the year with the most failures for students who became dropouts or had to attend high school for more than 4 years.
- Teacher E commented that I could see the advantage of locating all freshmen students in one place for the intense academic and social focus involved in helping with the transition to high school. I feel we are making a positive step in helping the freshmen make a successful transition. It is early in the process, and we know we will have to make some adjustments.
- Teacher F stated the belief that the freshman academy provided a more secure setting that has led to students earning more additional credits than in a traditional high school setting.
- Teacher H stated that the need for freshmen to receive more personalized attention is being addressed. This was one of the first positive indicators observed after the implementation.

Sense of Community. The administrators and teachers strive to promote a sense of community. Relationship building between teachers and students is encouraged. The

desire is that these relationships will instill a sense of belonging as the freshmen discover their identity. The support during this critical transition time helps to build self-esteem.

- Administrator A noted that the freshman academy has helped strengthen bonds between students and faculty. These bonds have made the freshmen feel a part of the main campus. We strive to provide a strong nurturing and safe environment in which the freshman can grow and mature.
- Teacher D stated that they have seen positive relationships built in the freshman academy. The students are more receptive to the faculty at the freshman academy. Improvements with student behavior have increased, but not necessarily in student learning. Students still have the freedom of choosing to learn or not to learn.
- Teacher F commented the comfort of a smaller learning environment is promoted by a close community or family feeling. That close community causes students to want to succeed, in my observations.

Concern with limited electives for the freshmen. The effort to isolate the freshmen and limit contact with upper classmen has limited electives available for freshmen. The objective is to provide a solid academic foundation. With the addition of a required freshmen experience class and a personal finance class, few elective opportunities are left for the students.

- Teacher D observed the freshmen seem disconnected when they are choosing electives for their sophomore year. They are unsure of what it will be like at the main campus and that seems to be a deciding factor for the choice of electives.

Some have even expressed anxiety over having classes with upper classmen. Others have expressed the desire to have more academic freedom in their freshman year. This was true for the students who struggled academically. They wanted to choose classes based on their interests.

- Teacher E echoed this observation by noting the limited curriculum makes the freshman academy seem more like an extension of the middle school. Some students feel as if they have not made it to high school. The feeling of extension of the middle school has disappointed quite a few of the students. Those with older siblings who did not experience the freshman academy feel they are not being allowed to mature.
- Teacher H expressed the desire to see more elective opportunities for the freshmen. The freshman year is the only year the students take year-long core classes. There are not as many opportunities for elective. This could cause a reverse effect for what we are striving for with less student engagement. Students become burnt out and feel as if they are still in middle school. They are not being treated as high school students, which could cause resentment.

Quantitative Measures

Analysis of Research Questions

Research Question 1. Is there a significant difference in EOC scores for Algebra I before (2010-2011) and after (2011-2012) the implementation of the Freshman Academy?

H_o1_1: There is no significant difference in EOC scores for Algebra I after the implementation of the Freshman Academy.

A two by two cross tabulated table displayed the Chi Square test results that were used to determine if there was a statistically significant difference in Algebra I EOC scores before and after the implementation of the Freshman Academy. EOC Algebra I scores were classified into two categories: (1) not proficient and (2) proficient or advanced. There were no violations of the assumptions of Chi Square: None of the cells had an expected count less than five and the minimum expected count was greater than one.

The Chi Square Test was significant, Pearson's χ^2 (1) = 36.17, $p < .001$. Therefore, the null hypothesis was rejected: There was a significant difference in the EOC Algebra I scores prior to and after the implementation of the Freshman Academy. As shown in Table 1, 54.8% of students in the 2010-2011 academic year prior to the implementation of the Freshman Academy were proficient or advanced in Algebra I while 72.2% were proficient or advanced after implementation in 2011 - 2012. That is, a higher percentage of students were proficient or advanced in Algebra I after the implementation of the Freshman Academy. Table 1 shows the cross tabulated table for Algebra I EOC Scores by the academic years prior to and after the implementation of the Freshman Academy.

Table 1

Cross tabulated Table for EOC Algebra I Scores by Academic Years Prior to and After Implementation of the Freshman Academy

	2010-2011		2011-2012	
Algebra I	N	%	N	%
Not Proficient	239	45.2	161	27.8
Proficient or Advanced	290	54.8	418	72.2
Total	529	100.0	579	100.0

Research Question 2. Is there a significant difference in EOC scores for English I before (2010-2011) and after (2011-2012) the implementation of the Freshman Academy?

H_o1_1: There is no significant difference in EOC scores for English I after the implementation of the Freshman Academy.

A two by two cross tabulated table displayed the Chi Square test results was used to determine if there was a statistically significant difference in English I EOC scores before and after the implementation of the Freshman Academy. EOC English I scores were classified into two categories: (1) not proficient and (2) proficient or advanced. There were no violations of the assumptions of Chi Square: None of the cells had an expected count less than five and the minimum expected count was greater than one.

The Chi Square Test was significant, Pearson's χ^2 (1) = 7.96, p = .005. Therefore, the null hypothesis was rejected: There was a significant difference in the EOC English I scores prior to and after the implementation of the Freshman Academy. As shown in

Table 2, 59.5% of students in the 2010-2011 academic years prior to the implementation of the Freshman Academy were proficient or advanced in English I while 67.7% were proficient or advanced after implementation in 2011 - 2012. That is, a higher percentage of students were proficient or advanced in English I after the implementation of the Freshman Academy. Table 2 shows the cross tabulated table for English I EOC Scores by the academic years prior to and after the implementation of the Freshman Academy.

Table 2

Cross tabulated Table for EOC English I Scores by Academic Years Prior to and After Implementation of the Freshman Academy

	2010-2011		2011-2012	
English I	N	%	N	%
Not Proficient	214	40.2	187	32.3
Proficient or Advanced	315	59.5	392	67.7
Total	529	100.0	579	100.0

Research Question 3. Is there a significant difference in the number of students failing their freshman year before (2010-2011) and after (2011-2012) the implementation of the Freshman Academy?

H_o3_1: There is no significant difference in the number of students failing their freshman year before and after the implementation of the Freshman Academy.

A two by two cross tabulated table displayed the Chi Square test results were used to determine if there was a statistically significant difference in failures before and after the implementation of the Freshman Academy. Failures were classified into two categories: (1) failed and (2) passed. There were no violations of the assumptions of Chi

Square: None of the cells had an expected count less than five and the minimum expected count was greater than one.

The Chi Square Test was significant, Pearson's χ^2 (1) = 5.84, p = .016. Therefore, the null hypothesis was rejected: There was a significant difference in the failures prior to and after the implementation of the Freshman Academy. As shown in Table 3, 17.0% of students in the 2010-2011 academic years prior to the implementation of the Freshman Academy failed the freshman year while 11.9% failed the freshman year after implementation in 2011 - 2012. That is, a lower percentage of students failed freshman year after the implementation of the Freshman Academy. Table 3 shows the cross tabulated table for failures by the academic years prior to and after the implementation of the Freshman Academy.

Table 3

Cross Tabulated Table for Passing Rate by Academic Years Prior to and After Implementation of the Freshman Academy

	2010-2011		2011-2012	
Failures	N	%	N	%
Failed	90	17.0	69	11.9
Passed	439	83.0	510	88.1
Total	529	100.0	579	100.0

Summary

Analysis of the data concerning the implementation of the freshman academy yielded several themes: staffing of the freshman academy; obstacles implementing the

freshman academy; concerns with delaying the transition into high school; and isolating freshman from the upper classmen of the main high school campus. The purpose of the freshman academy was to increase student achievement and assist in the transition into the larger campus for the remaining 3 years of high school. To accomplish this freshman were isolated on the main campus and placed on 4 academic teams. These four academic teams had 6 teachers. Teachers were able to build relationships with these students. The primary focus for the teachers was to provide additional academic monitoring and support. The importance of emotional support increased as the ability to manage the large number of freshman became manageable. This was done to accomplish the primary goal of increasing student achievement.

Data analysis for the year prior to and after the implementation of the freshman academy showed an increase in student achievement in Algebra I and English I. It was also noted that student failures decreased.

CHAPTER 5

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Introduction

Chapter 5 presents a summary of the findings, conclusions, and recommendations for the implementation of a freshman academy. The purpose of this study was to examine the impact on student achievement with the implementation of a freshman academy in rural East Tennessee. This mixed methods study was conducted qualitatively through interviews with two administrators and six freshman academy teachers. The quantitative portion was assessed through a comparison of the year prior to and the year after the implementation of the freshman academy. The data were examined for Algebra I, English I, and student failure rates during the freshman year.

Statement of the Problem

The purpose of the study was to analyze the impact of the implementation of a freshman academy on student achievement and examine perceptions of teachers and administrators about the design and implementation of the academy.

Qualitative Measures

Summary of Findings.

Research Question 1. What was the process of the implementation of the Freshman Academy?

Administrators and teachers were knowledgeable of the process and their roles in the implementation of the Freshman Academy. Decisions were made with input from all members of the staff. During the entire process the focus remained on what was best

for the student. The primary goal was to create an environment conducive to learning that catered to the developmental stages of a freshman as found by Neild (2009).

Research Question 2. What was the administrator's perception of the students' freshman experience before and after implementation of the Freshman Academy?

Administrators observed a more student focused faculty with a greater awareness of the students' academic and emotional needs. These needs were more readily addressed by the division of the large number of students in the freshman classes. By isolating the students from sophomores, juniors, and seniors, the freshmen were given another year to build confidence and maturity. This also aided the freshman coming from the smaller feeder schools adapt to the larger school and larger student population, as noted by Neild (2009).

Research Question 3. What was the teacher's perception of the students' freshman experience before and after implementation of the Freshman Academy?

Teachers observed the smaller learning community created a positive learning environment. They were able to create relationships with students that became valuable in teaching. Students who were struggling in core classes were more easily identified. Coupled with the better relationships, the students were more receptive to interventions. Additionally, teachers have observed an improvement on test scores with the implementation of the Freshman Academy. These findings concur with Cook et al. (2008).

One purpose of this study was to examine the process of the implementation of the freshman academy. Based on the findings of the research the implementation was achieved in a professional manner. There was no report of disagreements throughout the

implementation process. The administrators and teachers configured the academy based on the team model recommended by research. The team model used was four teams with six core teachers; two math, two English, one science, and one social studies. Cushman (2006) recommended placing students on academic teams. The students' academic and emotional needs are then more easily managed. Students are also free to focus on adjusting to the next stage of their education with a transition to assist them into high school. The teachers are able to monitor student behavior and achievement. Students and teachers are not overwhelmed by the enormity of a large population. The students are not lost in the general population as in a traditional high school. The teachers have a smaller group of students to supervise. Bloom (2010) observed when schools are purposefully organized around smaller, personalized units of adults and students, students have a better chance of being noticed and known personally. Stewart (2005) added that having a school climate conducive to student participation increased opportunities for at-risk students to become involved socially and academically.

A second purpose of this study was to examine the perception of the administrators and teachers of the student's freshman experience. Based on the findings the administrators observed a more student focused faculty. Students appeared to adapt more quickly to the freshman academy and the smaller learning community, as found by Stevenson (2006). Stevenson observed that smaller schools produce better academic achievement. The teachers observed stronger relationships between themselves and the students. The students appeared to have a greater sense of belonging. Wheelock and Miao (2005) advocated for the improvement in relationships to build confident freshman.

To build these relationships, teachers had to be more student focused for these relationships to be successful.

The qualitative portion of this study revealed the implementation of the freshman academy was positive for the planning stage through the first year of the freshman academy. Overall, the administrators and teachers felt a sense of accomplishment. The goal now is to continue and add to the successes of the first year.

Quantitative Measures

Summary of Findings

The data analysis reported on the three research questions are based on a .05 level of significance. Variables included in the study are EOC scores for Algebra I, EOC scores for English I, and student failure rate for the freshman year.

Research Question 1. Is there a significant difference in EOC scores for Algebra I before (2010-2011) and after (2011-2012) the implementation of the Freshman Academy?

A chi square analysis of variance was used to determine if a significant difference exists in Algebra I EOC scores before implementation of the Freshman Academy and after implementation. There was a significant difference in EOC Algebra I scores prior to and after implementation of the Freshman Academy. The scores were significantly higher after the implementation of the Freshman Academy.

Research Question 2. Is there a significant difference in EOC in English I before (2010-2011) and after (2011-2012) the implementation of the Freshman Academy?

A chi square analysis of variance was used to determine if a significant difference

exists in English I EOC scores before implementation of the Freshman Academy and after implementation. There was a significant difference in EOC English I scores prior to and after implementation of the Freshman Academy. The scores were significantly higher after the implementation of the Freshman Academy.

Research Question 3. Is there a significant difference in the number of students failing their freshman year before (2010-2011) and after (2011-2012) the implementation of the Freshman Academy?

A chi square analysis of variance was used to determine if a significant difference exists in students failing their freshman year before implementation and after implementation of the Freshman Academy. There was a significant difference between students who failed their freshman year prior to and after the implementation of the freshman academy. A 5.1% decrease was observed after implementation of the freshman academy compared to before the implementation.

Hawthorne Effect

The quantitative data used in the comparison of EOC scores and student failures were from the year prior to and after the implementation of the Freshman Academy. These facts warrant cautious interpretation of the data with the acknowledgement of the Hawthorne Effect. The Hawthorne Effect limits generalizability due to the study subject's knowledge of being studied. The Hawthorne Effect accounts for an increase in positive or desirable results because of the intervention. Therefore, the intervention may only appear to be significant due to the novelty of the treatment (McMillen, 2008). In this study the implementation of the Freshman Academy would be the intervention to increase student achievement.

Recommendations for Practice

Based on the findings of this study the following are recommendations for practice.

1. The small increase in the number of promoted freshman warrants further examination. Cook et al. (2008) recommended a more intense focus on providing intervention for students at risk of failing freshman year. Bloom et al. (2010) observed that students who were on track toward graduation by the end of their freshman year were more likely to graduate on time.
2. Examine the teacher selection process. Research the student achievement between the teachers who were hand-selected by the administration and those who volunteered.
3. Have the Freshman Academy staff extend the process of transition to an earlier point in the eighth grade year as recommended by Cohen and Smerdon (2009). Cohen and Smerdon (2009) noted the varying effects of the transition to high school based on the student's emotional stability and ability to adapt. This would provide Freshman Academy faculty and staff with valuable information aiding in programming and curricular decisions.
4. Explore offering more electives to students at the academy to provide a broader range of classes.
5. Examine activities to integrate the freshmen with the older students socially and academically in a controlled setting.
6. Explore creating academies for the upper classmen to provide the same academic and emotional support that was done for the freshmen in the freshman academy.

Recommendations for Further Research

1. Additional research should be conducted on expanding the academy concept in the 10th through the 12th grade.
2. Conduct a qualitative study to examine the perceptions of the freshmen as well as their parents.
3. Examine the plausibility of the smaller learning community continuing through the remaining years of high school to extend the concentrated support provided to the freshman who came from the academy. Donegan (2008) noted the transition to high school is an ongoing process.
4. Study the impact of the freshman academy on the student's transition into the 10th grade.
5. Additional research should be conducted on implementing a transition program for students leaving elementary school and entering middle school.

Conclusions

Qualitative

One purpose of this study was to examine the process of the implementation of the freshman academy. Based on the findings of the research, the implementation was achieved in a professional manner. There was no report of disagreements throughout the implementation process. The administrators and teachers configured the academy based on the team model recommended by research. The team model used was four teams with six core teachers; two math, two English, one science, and one social studies, as Cushman (2006) recommended. The student's academic and emotional needs are then more easily

managed. Students are also free to focus on adjusting to the next stage of their education with a transition to assist them into high school. The teachers are able to monitor student behavior and achievement. Students and teachers are not overwhelmed by the enormity of a large population. The students are not lost in the general population as in a traditional high school. The teachers have a smaller group of students to supervise. Bloom (2010) observed when schools are purposefully organized around smaller, personalized units of adults and students, students have a better chance of being noticed and known personally. Stewart (2005) added that having a school climate conducive to student participation increased opportunities for at risk students to become involved socially and academically.

A second purpose of this study was to examine the perception of the administrators and teachers of the students' freshman experience. Based on the findings of the study, the administrators observed a more student focused faculty. Students appeared to adapt more quickly to the freshman academy and the smaller learning community, as found by Stevenson (2006). Stevenson observed that smaller schools produce better academic achievement. The teachers observed stronger relationships between themselves and the students. The students appeared to have a greater sense of belonging. Wheelock and Miao (2005) advocated for the improvement in relationships to build confident freshman. To build these relationships, teachers had to be more student focused.

The qualitative portion of this study revealed the implementation of the freshman academy was positive for the planning stage through the first year of the freshman

academy. Overall, the administrators and teachers felt a sense of accomplishment. The goal now is to continue and add to the successes of the first year.

Quantitative

The purpose of the quantitative portion of this study was to examine the level of proficiency for freshmen taking the Algebra I and English I EOC prior to and after the implementation of the freshman academy. There was a significant difference found in both the Algebra I and English I EOC scores. The EOC scores were significantly higher after implementation. This conclusion is supported by the findings of Styron and Peasant (2010) who contended that students in ninth grade academies outperformed students in traditional high schools in core classes.

The second quantitative purpose of this study was to examine the students who failed the freshman year. There was a significant difference found in a reduction of students failing the freshman year after implementation of the freshman academy compared to before implementation. This conclusion is supported by the findings of Thornton (2009), Teffeteller (2010), and Samuelson (2011). All found a significant difference in the number of ninth grade students who were promoted on time in freshman academies.

Summary

Chapter 5 contains a summary of the findings for this mixed methods study. Recommendations for practice and further research were drawn based on the conclusions of the study. This study examined the impact of the implementation of a freshman academy in rural East Tennessee on student achievement. The variables studied were the

implementation process, the perceptions of the administrators and teachers, EOC scores for Algebra I and English I in the years prior to and after the implementation of the freshman academy. In addition, the number of students who failed his or her freshman year prior to and after the implementation of the freshman academy were also examined.

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APPENDIX A

Administrator Interview Questions

1. Please tell what position you hold at the freshman academy?
2. What impacted the decision for a freshman academy?
3. Describe the decision making process that resulted in the implementation of the freshman academy.
4. What research foundation did you use in the process?
5. What kind of support did you receive from the school board? Faculty? Staff? Community?
6. What factors affected your staffing decisions?
7. Did teachers volunteer?
8. What physical factors influenced the decision making process?
9. What physical obstacle did you face?
10. What do you believe are the strengths of the freshman academy?
11. What do you believe are the weaknesses of the freshman academy?
12. How do you think the freshman academy will impact student learning?

APPENDIX B

Teacher Interview Questions

1. Please tell what position you hold at the freshman academy?
2. How familiar were you with the freshman academy prior to its implementation?
3. What were you initial thoughts about the freshman academy?
4. What was the process for the teacher's during the implementation?
5. How active were you in developing the plan for the freshman academy?
6. What specialized training have you received in freshman academy?
7. What were your expectations for the freshman academy?
8. What do you believe are the strengths of the freshman academy?
9. What do you believe are the weaknesses of the freshman academy?
10. How do you think the freshman academy will impact student learning?

VITA

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